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ABSTRACT

A study examined two questions: What are the common functions and features of literacy as evidenced in children's spontaneous play within a preschool setting, and how frequently do they occur across different groups of preschoolers? Trained observers recorded the play behavior of each of 50 children (the average age was 4 years) during four 10-minute periods over 2 months, yielding 200 play protocols. Conent analysis of these protocols yielded five categories of literacy functions which appear to be common across different groups of preschoolers (exploratory, interactional, personal, authenticating, and transactional functions) and three broad categories of features of literacy demonstrations (awareness of text messages, awareness of symbolic representation, awareness of the conventions of print). Results indicated that preschoolers appear to use literacy in ways that are meaningful to them, and that they develop conscious knowledge about the forms and functions of written language at a very young age. Moreover, results highlighted the intimacy between form and function, with features of written language apparently layered in written language functions and appearing as the function unfolds. (Two tables of data and 2 figures are included; 26 references are attached.) (SR)

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Preschoolers' conceptions of literacy as reflected in their spontaneous play

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Preschoolers' conceptions of literacy as reflected in their spontaneous play

Susan B. Neuman and Kathy Roskos

A great deal of attention has centered in the last decade on the young child's developing conceptions of the features and forms of written language. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), for example, provided a detailed analysis of how children come to know language through their exploration of print as a cultural object. Clay (1967; 1969) and others (Goodman & Altwerger, 1981; Goodman, 1984; Mason, 1980) have described the young child's emerging concepts about print conventions, such as directionality and punctuation, speech-to-print match, and sense of word and letter. This attention to how children come to know the features or technicalities of written language has contributed substantially to a growing understanding of the early phases of literacy development.

Less attention, however, has centered on the young child's developing conceptions of the functions of written language, even though some have suggested that such knowledge is "of crucial importance" in literacy learning (Downing, 1979; Wells, 1985). Of studies that have been conducted, a number of metalinguistic researchers have focused on the young children's cognitive confusion and general failure to display conventional knowledge

of literacy (Downing, Ollila, & Oliver, 1977; Yaden, 1984). Others, however, have argued that the functional principles that young children develop at an early age represent "real" uses of written language (Goodman, 1984; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984).

The relative lack of research studies and agreement about the functional dimension of written language may be attributed to two factors. One has to do with the confusion surrounding the word "function" itself. The term has been used broadly in the literature in conjunction with "purpose" or reasons for written language, such as "for communication" (Downing, 1979; Yaden, 1986), or perceptions of written language, as in "What is reading?" (Johns, 1986). The word function has also been used to denote the context or situation-of-use of written language which serves to make encounters with print meaningful (Goodman, 1984; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; Rowe & Harste, 1986; Heath, 1982; 1983). Such a variety of definitions has limited the ability to generalize across studies.

Another contributing factor involves a methodological issue: investigations of the young child's understanding of the uses of written language have generally been within decontextualized settings with minimal consideration of the child's point of reference or point of view (Hall, 1987). Using this approach, deficiencies are highlighted while emerging conceptions may remain in the shadows. Although some recent studies have suggested more liberal scoring criteria when examining youngsters' responses to functional tasks (Lomax & McGee, 1987),

these are nevertheless derived from conventional test settings. In short, there seems to be little available information that describes the functions of written language as perceived and used by young children on their own terms.

The possibility that children do, indeed, have some working notions about the functions of written language has been evidenced in a number of recent descriptive studies. Goodman (1984) referring to these as "functional principles," cited ownership, labeling and invitations as examples of "real" functions of written langauge for young children. Providing evidence from an ethnographic study, Jacob (1984) reported emerging conceptions of the functions of written language in the play of Puerto Rican kindergartners. For example, children pretended to construct and use shopping lists, buy goods with food stamps, and get prescriptions from a doctor. Similarly, Roskos, in describing the play activities of 8 preschoolers, found that children used reading and writing to legitimate their pretend play, to express themselves and to record information within play events (1987).

Examining children's developing conceptions of literacy in a child-controlled environment, therefore, may provide a more conducive setting to describe their knowledge of the functions and features of print in early literacy development. As children play, they may be demonstrating their constructive hypotheses about written language as a "sense-making" activity.

With these considerations in mind, this study was designed

to examine preschoolers' emerging conceptions of literacy in the naturalistic environment of spontaneous play, defined here as voluntary, self-selected, "free play time.". Specifically, the objectives of the study were two-fold: 1) What are the common functions and features of literacy as evidenced in children's spontaneous play within a preschool setting? and, 2) How frequently do they occur across different groups of preschoolers?

Method

Subjects: Fifty children (26 boys; 24 girls), ranging in ages from 3.2-4.6 (X=4.0), from two preschools, participated in the study. All the children were native speakers of English. Twenty of the children came from professional families and attended a preschool in their immediate neighborhood. The other 30 children resided in federal assistance housing, and attended a local preschool supported by the state. While differences in the quality of materials in these school were evident, both preschools included a house/kitchen corner, a block area, a coloring/writing table, and a book corner.

Procedures: To examine children's conceptions of the functions of literacy in their spontaneous play, observational procedures were followed using an approach developed by Singer and Singer (1980), in their analysis of pretend play behavior among preschoolers.

Four graduate students in language arts participated in two training sessions, using play protocols from an earlier study, on

observational techniques. Observers were trained to record the child's actions, and language (verbatim), time they began and ended each observation, and date. Observers were instructed not to interpret behavior, but rather to record what actually occurred during the observational period.

Each child in the study was individually observed during free play for a 10 minute period on four separate occasions by two observers. A total of 40 minutes of observation was recorded for each child over a two month period, yielding 200 play protocols.

Analysis

These protocols were content analyzed in three phases. First, play segments were analyzed for evidence of literacy demonstrations, defined as an instances of reading or writing-like behavior. Such examples included scribbling, marking on paper, pretending to read, book-handling or attending to print in some manner. Second, boundaries segmenting each literacy-like behavior, were established to allow for the coding of each demonstration. Two indicators were used to establish boundaries: shifts in the focus of the play activity (e.g. switching from playing in the kitchen to the book corner), and shifts in interaction between the players (e.g., a player initiates play/talk with some one else on a new topic).

Third, each demonstration was analyzed for its function, defined here as processes which indicated children's understanding of reading and writing-like behaviors. Each author

independently read 25 randomly selected protocols and identified functional categories. These categories were compared, and frequently used play behaviors were extracted. Five categories of functions from this analysis were identified.

Insert Table 1 about here

Literacy demonstrations were also analyzed for evidence of featural knowledge of written language. Here, categories were established by combining several of the classification schemes reported in studies in emergent literacy (Clay, 1979; Reid, Hresko, & Hammill, 1981; Taylor, 1986). Three broad categories of features were analyzed, focusing on children's awareness of word and letter concepts, symbolic features, and conventions of written language.

Insert Table 2 about here

Following a training session and two practice sessions, two research assistants independently coded a sample of 20 play protocols for play boundaries, function, and feature. Intercoder reliability indicated perfect agreement in the determination of play boundaries, .93 for function, and .95 for feature. After establishing the reliability of the coding system, all remaining protocols were read and coded for functional and featural categories.

Results and Discussion

A total of 103 literacy demonstrations were recorded in the 200 play protocols. Overall, the number of demonstrations ranged from 0-16, with a median of two events occurring during the 40 minutes of free play activity for each child.

Frequencies of the functions of literacy are reported in Figure 1. The exploratory, interactional and transactional functions were most commonly found in children's play activities. Children demonstrating the exploratory function used reading and writing to manipulate and investigate various elements in their environment. Examples included playing with file folders, handling letters and using a typewriter. The interactional function focused on the social and communicational nature of literacy. Here, children used reading and writing to spend time with others, to play games, and to pretend to record information in play. The transactional function emphasized the uses of literacy as a means to negotiate meaning between print and the user. Children used reading or writing to label or name items, and to make events more meaningful in play.

The uses of literacy for personal reasons, to claim ownership or to aide memory, and for authenticating actions were found less frequently in the play protocols. It may be that such functions are not as applicable in the more public arena of play as the others.

Frequencies of children's demonstrations of the features of

literacy are illustrated in Figure 2. In play, children demonstrated their understanding that print carries a message while engaged in activities of their own volition. Further, children illustrated some knowledge of the technical features of print, as in letter names, word knowledge, and spellings. In fact, about one-third of the literacy demonstrations included this type of featural knowledge. In combination, these two categories lend support to Goodman's position that linguistic awareness develops in conjunction with its use (1984).

Demonstrations of children's understanding of the conventions of print were less evident in their play behavior. One obvious explanation is that children in the play context do not have opportunities to display such knowledge. Another, less obvious but also observed in related research, may be that such knowledge has already become internalized, and is almost habitual by the preschool years. Therefore, this knowledge may be overshadowed by children's increasingly more sophisticated problem solving concerns, including their attempts to read actual print or draw letters (Goodman, 1984; Reid, Hresko & Hammill, 1981).

Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine differences between gender and socio-economic status in the recorded number of literacy demonstrations across groups. No significant differences were reported for gender (χ^2 = 4.0, df=7, $p < .73$), or SES, (χ^2=8.13, df=7, $p < .32$), indicating that at this initial stage of emergent literacy, children's conceptions of print were

not differentiable by these characteristics.

Conclusions

This exploratory investigation was designed to examine children's conceptions of literacy in spontaneous play. The results of the study indicated that preschoolers appeared to use literacy outside of the home, on their own and with others, in ways that are meaningful to them. These findings provide further evidence to suggest that young children do indeed develop conscious knowledge about the forms and functions of written language at a very young age. In their play, preschoolers may be demonstrating their early attempts to understand and gain power over the rules of literacy.

This study also indicated that there appears to be broad categories of functions which are common across different groups of preschoolers. We hypothesize that these large domains of functions may characterize the young child's meaning networks or emerging conceptions of what written language is used for. It is within these boundaries that the novice may be genuinely exploring how written language works. While we observed five major categories in the children's spontaneous play, broader-based studies are need to verify the presence and commonality of these domains of functions and their possible influence on literacy development in general.

Lastly, the results of the study highlight the intimacy between function and feature. Like strata, features of written

language seem to be layered in written language functions and to appear as the function unfolds. In fact, we experienced little difficulty in locating evidence of featural knowledge. Of special interest, however, were suggestions of possible relationships between types of domains of functions and kinds of featural knowledge displayed. More investigation is warranted in this area since it addresses the "form follows function" hypothesis in literacy learning, which this study and others imply (Goodman, K., 1986; Wells, 1986).

Thus, in the broadest sense, the study supports the "everything is happening at once" perspective on literacy development (Goodman, 1984; Hall, 1987; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1986). In its narrowest, it provides direction for more finely-tooled studies of young children's conceptions of the functions of written language and how these influence children's awareness of the features of literacy learning.

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Table 1

A typology of the functional domains of literacy

as evidenced in children's spontaneous play

Domain	Kinds of functions	Examples
Exploratory (The "how does it work?" function)	- To experiment with print	Jackie writes 'o' 'h', 'a'
	- To handle literacy-related materials	"We're opening all these envelopes"
	- To figure out how to do	"It says open right here"
Interactional (The "between you and me" function)	- To play a game	"Let's play cards"
	-To communicate with others	"I'll give something to you (a note). It's about you coming over. You have to come over."
	- To share information	"Would you read this to me"
Personal (The "for me function)	- To express oneself	"I write the word love. I like to write it."
	- To claim ownership	"This is my picture."
	- To aid memory	"I have to make a list of phone numbers."

		Conceptions of literacy
Authenticating (The "Legitimating" function)	- To verify information	"You see, Susan, it saying "Happy Arbor Day"
	_ To act grown up	"We have to have all our taxes and I'm filling the taxes this year. You did 'em wrong last year."
	- To endorse	"They have to come to the doctor's by noon to make an appointment."
Transactional (The "between me and text" function)	- To label	"This doesn't say 'stacho'
	- To communicate about	Pointing to book, "I'm over on this page."
	- To construct meaning from text	Tells teacher that the picture book says "I love you"

Table 2

A typology of the features of literacy as demonstrated in children's spontaneous play

Features of literacy	Examples
Awareness of text messages	Finger pointing to print Reading pictures from print Pretending to read Pointing to printed label
Awareness of symbolic representation	Points to a letter Distinguishes letter by name Differentiates letter and number Awareness of words Recognizes specific sight words
Awareness of the conventions of print	Book handling Shows left to right orientation Shows top or bottom of printed artifact

Figure 1

Demonstrations of the functions of literacy
in preschoolers' spontaneous play

Figure 2

Demonstrations of the features of literacy
in preschoolers' spontaneous play

Figure 1
Demonstrations of the functions of literacy in preschoolers' spontaneous play

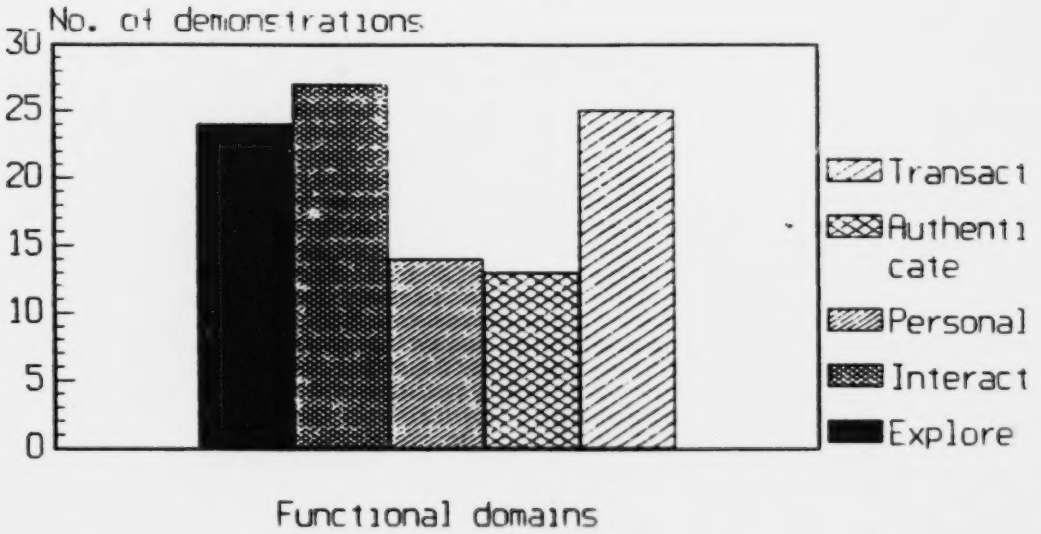

Figure 2
Demonstrations of the features of literacy in preschoolers' spontaneous play